

Brother Dan Fenton
San Miguel High School
6601 S. San Fernando Rd.
Tucson, AZ 85706

Dear Brothers, Colleagues and Friends.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your support, in donations and in prayers, as I traveled with two volunteers to the Philippines in June. This was my fifth summer in a row at Bahay Pag-asa Youth Center near Bacolod City on the island of Negros. I traveled with Chris McNabb from La Salle University, Philadelphia and Jeffrey Morgan from Saint Mary's College, Moraga. We want you to know that, while we are deeply indebted to our donors who made our trip possible, we are very much grateful for the prayers that we know you offered. It is remarkable to me that the young men at Bahay Pag-asa and the Halfway House ask me for only one thing – prayers. And they are always greatly consoled when I tell them that many of us are praying for them and for their families. It is very difficult for many of them that they cannot directly help their families while they are at Bahay Pag-asa, and they often express fears that their families are in danger or poor health. They do trust in God, though, and they count your prayers as the greatest blessings they receive, because they believe that God hears. And so, I would like to provide you with an update regarding the work that the Brothers and their colleagues are doing for these kids, as a way of thanking you.

There were many interesting developments this year at Bahay Pag-asa and the Halfway House. Perhaps the best news is that eight of the Bahay Pag-asa residents have moved to the Halfway House at St. Joseph's High School. This means that their court cases are now resolved and that they are no longer subject to the courts or at risk of going back to jail. Seven of the young men (Rexie, Jason, Winston, John, Raniel, Harry, and John Benedict) are taking high school classes in the evenings and working at the water filtration business during the day. This water-selling business has been established at the Halfway House to help make the program there self-supporting. A company in Bacolod installed the water filtration equipment right inside the Halfway House and carried out training for the residents. The water produced by the residents will find a ready market at our elementary schools, high schools, and university in Bacolod City. In addition to these seven residents, one additional resident, Romel, has been admitted to and is attending the University of Saint La Salle in Bacolod and is majoring in Special Education. Romel's story is particularly compelling since he grew up in a dirt-floor shack in a squatter village and was convicted of a homicide that was the result of his attempt to defend himself against an attack. His constant effort and faithful participation in the programs at Bahay Pag-asa have led him this far and he prays each day that he will have a life that is fulfilling and that allows him to help his family.



The young men in the white shirts are the residents of Bahay Pag-asa Halfway House which is located at St. Joseph's High School, Br. Vince is kneeling in front.

There are young men at Bahay Pag-asa whose cases have been resolved but who are not yet at the high school level. Mario, Danilo and Lyndon are in this situation and so they have chosen to remain at Bahay Pag-asa as residents while attending the nearby Father Gratian School to complete their elementary education. These three young men, despite being significantly older than their classmates, are doing very well in school and have even been asked to join the faculty during the lunch break. They are serving as leaders and assistants in the classroom. Several other young men have finished their program and have gone home since they felt the need to move back in with their families and help them out directly. One other special case is Roy, who is actually at the college level and had been arrested and charged for killing two ex-convicts who were attacking his father. Roy is a strong and intelligent young man who regrets deeply that his rescue of his father resulted in the death of the assailants and he is determined to see his case resolved and go back to his college courses. Roy is staying at Bahay Pag-asa and receiving special tutoring until the courts make a final determination regarding him.



Bahay Pag-asa resident Roy, working on his biology experiment

There were, at the time of our departure, six newer residents at Bahay Pag-asa. These are Jehno, Robert, Edmar, Reynaldo, Arvie and Roland. Most of these boys are arrested because they were recruited into gangs and crime syndicates by adults who are using minors to carry out thefts, robberies, drug-transactions, and currency fraud. Spending time with these young men is an amazing experience since their sensitive and friendly nature doesn't seem to fit the lives that they lived on the street. Most of these boys were, in fact, street kids, having run away from home to escape problems there. Between the six, they have experienced gang initiations and tattooing, drug use (including solvents, marijuana, and methamphetamines), sexual abuse at the hands of adults who organize minors into criminal gangs, physical abuse and threat of torture at the hands of police officers, and the squalid conditions of police lockups, jails, and "social development centers." Generally, they arrive in poor health and several have had to have teeth pulled because they have had no dental care. Arvie, who has spent his life working as a sugarcane harvester, is unbelievably small in stature for a young man of 17 years. When he arrived at Bahay Pag-asa, a guard asked him to "sign-in" at the front desk. Arvie cried because he had never gone to school and did not know how to write. He feared that his illiteracy would result in his rejection from the program. In three months, Arvie has learned to hold a pen and write as well as carry on simple conversations in English.



Residents of Bahay Pag-asa: Robert (left) and Edmar (right)

Each of these boys has shown a special interest academically. Robert, for instance, has taken over the job of maintaining the weather station and recording important weather events. During our stay, Typhoon Frank roared through dumping 14 inches of rain on Bahay Pag-asa in less than three days. Robert dutifully recorded all of these events in his weather log and later told me that he is “so happy to have this responsibility.” Jehno is in charge of the three telescopes and maintains them and trains the other residents to use them. Arvie is working on the insect collections and proudly displays “my bugs” to the visitors. Edmar watches over the two microscopes and shows new residents how to look at live protozoans from the pond. Upon our departure, these boys all cried because they have never before had the opportunities to learn so much and to take pride in their academic success.

Chris McNabb, from La Salle University, Philadelphia and Jeffrey Morgan, from Saint Mary’s College of California, were the two volunteers this summer. Quite unlike each other, they worked very well together and complemented each other’s interests and talents. Chris found himself immediately at home among the residents and spent much time with them learning their stories and sharing their experiences. He taught English to most of the residents (Arvie worked individually with Jeffrey) and organized a spelling bee to generated interest. Chris also shares the Filipino love of singing and was always ready to join the residents in their musical recreation. Jeffrey, being tall and having long

blond hair, was an immediate curiosity among the boys and they enjoyed challenging him to basketball games on a daily basis. Jeffrey brought his guitar and played along with the residents who have a notable talent for music. In addition to teaching Arvie, Jeffrey taught advanced mathematics to Roy so that he could keep up his skills at the college level. I thank God for these two young men, because they brought a great spirit, faith and dedication to their work. We lived in the youth center, we ate the meals prepared by the boys and shared in their projects (like redesigning the fish ponds). Chris and Jeffrey were up each morning by 6:00 AM and prayed with the boys three times a day. And in a month of doing this they could not come up with a single complaint. Even Chris, who spent a night in the local hospital after coming down with food-poisoning (from a meal outside of Bahay Pag-asa), remained remarkably cheerful throughout the entire experience.



Chris McNabb offers these thoughts:



Jeffrey Morgan reflects on what he learned and experienced this summer:

“The situation with young people born into poverty in the Philippines is reminiscent of similar ills in our society. Minors have been out of jails here, but they are kept in juvenile detention halls, where gang violence and drug dealing perpetuate themselves. Boys here and there, at home and abroad, need to be placed in rehabilitative centers before they ever reach the horrors of the punitive jail system. The boys at Bahay Pag-asa have been a great testament to the effect of dedicated staff, praying men and women of God, who pour their hearts and wisdom into the boys. The young men there are really given mercy, a second chance, and show themselves so often to only be the victims, ready to learn and grow if only given the chance to do so. And at Bahay Pag-asa, street kids are compelled to transform their self image, from “worthless product of poverty” to children of the living, loving God.”

“The boys of Pag-asa have amazing stories that in many ways parallel those of the Scriptures. Suffering, brokenness, redemption and transformation are common themes. Throughout the duration of my stay at Bahay Pag-asa, God was opening my eyes more and more to His presence and to His will. His love was revealed in real but mysterious ways through the boys at Bahay Pag-asa, where God’s transforming will is so evident in the gospel stories of their lives.”

“It’s been very hard making the transition from life in the Philippines to life at home, where I feel most comfortable to be the same as I’ve always been. But I know I’m different. The question that I am asking continuously is this: How should my lifestyle change in response to what I have learned during this trip? And, did I really just spend a month in the Philippines? How have I changed? Thank you again for hosting for me one of the most meaningful experiences of my entire life. I am very grateful to have experienced a little of God’s love by loving those boys.”

As you have heard, there was a typhoon while we were in Bacolod, the center of which passed about 45 to 50 miles from us. Several boats and ships were lost including a passenger ferry, The Princess of the Stars. Carrying over 800 passengers, this ship sailed directly into the path of the typhoon which had changed course. It capsized amid winds of over 100 miles per hour and extremely rough seas. Only about 60 passengers were rescued; the rest were lost at sea or trapped in the ship as it rested, upside down on the sea floor near Romblon. Rescue attempts were stymied by the fact that the ship was also carrying thousands of kilos of endosulfan, a highly toxic insecticide. In addition to this ship disaster, poor residents of Iloilo and Manila were inundated by heavy flooding and the release of water from behind a failing dam on the island of Panay. The biggest problem for us at Bahay Pag-asa was minor flooding inside our house as water running off the mountains piled up behind the youth center. We spent the better part of one day bailing and mopping – a small inconvenience compared to what others suffered.

During our stay, Brother Vince and his staff were able to update us as to the realities associated with the new Juvenile Justice Reform Act (referred to as “9344”). This law, passed in 2006 as a result of international awareness of the inhumane conditions that minors experienced in adult jails and prisons, declares that no minor under 15 years of age may be kept in any jail for more than 8 hours and that minors between the ages of 15 and 17 may only be incarcerated if they can be shown to have acted “with discernment.” President Arroyo declared that all illegally held minors must be released. The truth, however, is that there are many minors still being held in jails and, in some cases, held in overcrowded cells with adults. We visited just such a group in the Bacoar Jail outside of Manila. The group of boys we talked to there had not been released because their families no longer wanted them or because their families could not be found. Other minors have been removed from jail and have been placed in “social development centers” which are funded by the government (unlike Bahay Pag-asa which has received no such funding). We visited one of these centers and found a large number of minors in what looked like a jail – a concrete building with locked bars and gates. The boys we saw were covered with sores from a skin disease they contract in jail – a condition that only goes away with treatment and good hygiene. A number of the boys were locked inside an adjoining room. Compared to the beautiful and healthy surroundings of Bahay Pag-asa, this SDC (as it is called) looked little better than the nearby jail.

Another problem associated with Act 9344 is that the minors released, after having committed a crime, are often simply dumped back into their old squatter camps and neighborhoods where they continue the same behaviors and become more and more dependent on drugs. The social workers, who are supposed to find the necessary services for minors apprehended by the police, are overwhelmed and unable to provide much help. Moreover, there is no uniform understanding of the new law on the part of judges, social workers and other government agencies. Bahay Pag-asa is caught in the middle and has even begun to put together programs to inform all those who are responsible for the disposition of CICL (children in conflict with the law). Brother Vince wrote that a recent visit to Bahay Pag-asa and the Halfway House from a Family Court judge may provide some clarification in procedure and a smoother transition for young men needing help. A lack of resources, inadequate training of social workers and police officers,

corruption and inefficiency at all levels of government, and a bureaucracy that has been described as “moribund” all contribute to a situation for youthful offenders that is confusing at best and dangerous and abusive at the worst. While less likely to spend time in an adult jail, the typical youth offender in the Philippines is probably no more safe today than before 9344 was passed. In a recent event, a family refused to bring rape charges against one accused minor, preferring instead to lure the boy, with promises of employment, to a remote location where he was murdered. Revenge killings against minors are on the rise as people distrustful of the new law take matters into their own hands. One of the boys now at Bahay Pag-asa experienced this kind of unofficial justice when he was being kept at a local jail. The family of a man he and his friends had attacked paid police officers to bring the boys to a location where they could be beaten by the family as a form of revenge. Each year we hear more and more of these stories.

Despite these problems, the staff of Bahay Pag-asa continues to work, heroically at times, to provide the best chance of rehabilitation for youthful offenders, all of who are coming from backgrounds of poverty and deprivation. Brother Vince has been involving the residents in outreach projects to the minors at the social development centers. He hopes to increase these efforts during this next year and has asked us to prepare some educational programs which can be used during our next visit in June-July 2009. Br. Vince is also establishing a fund or endowment for the continuing education of those young men who finish their course of rehabilitation at Bahay Pag-asa. And he works tirelessly at the transformation of Bahay Pag-asa into a center which supports itself through the agricultural work of the residents, which is carried out in addition to their studies.



A Bahay Pag-asa guard transports Lyndon to school.

Meanwhile, Brother Gus Boquer has begun the construction of the second Bahay Pagasa Youth Center in Cavite (near Manila). A third such center is planned for the island of Mindanao. All of us who have been involved are so grateful to have been able to contribute in some small way to the realization of the hopes and dreams embodied by the Bahay Pag-asa Youth Center. We have been inspired by the Brothers and staff members who work with such great dedication for the betterment of these disadvantaged boys. And we are extremely grateful to you, our donors, who make our efforts possible. Without you we could never afford to travel so far nor could we bring the educational gifts and vital donations that continue to help Bahay Pag-asa serve the needs of youth. Please know that you are in the daily prayers of the residents there as well as in ours. The boys ask, also, they you remember them in your prayers. There is so much at stake and they truly believe that your prayers, together with theirs, can make all the difference. As we begin to prepare for next years' service trip, we will keep you informed of developments in the programs at Bahay Pag-asa as our way of thanking you for everything you have done. God bless you!

Sincerely,

Brother Dan Fenton (and the volunteers)



Arvie and his goat